Whitney Philip Morris wall drawings by Byron Kim

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

[**Whitney Philip Morris** wall drawings by **Byron Kim**]

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Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

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This brochure accompanies the exhibition "Whitney Philip Morris,"
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Whitney Museum of American Art.

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WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART AT PHILIP MORRIS

SCULPTURE COURT:

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Sunday	11:00am - 7:00pm

A Conversation in the Periphery

Two months before the opening of "Whitney Philip Morris," three friends of Byron Kim met to talk about his work. At the time this conversation took place, Kim was deciding what he wanted to do with his exhibition. To varying degrees, each of the three participants—an artist, a poet, and an arts administrator—was familiar with the process Kim was going through to arrive at a solution, but they knew only that he was thinking of dirtying the gallery's walls with dirt and grime of New York City. Kim provided the group with several quotations (mostly from other artists' writings) and some of his own journal entries, which were central to his decisions regarding the show. Kim was not present, but the resulting conversation became an integral part of the process he used to create this exhibition.

1: Do you think we're here because Byron doesn't want to take responsibility for what is said about what he's doing?

2: I think he wants to be contrarian, and the risk is exciting for him.

3: I don't see it that way at all. He seems to be extremely nervous about it.

1: Don't you think that this is part of his personality? I've listened to him explain this project twice, and both times he kept dancing around what he was going to do. The second time I wanted to kill him. The person he was talking to was trying to get at what he was trying to say, and Byron just would not give it to him. Creatively, things are always happening in the periphery, and artists do this funny dance to get at what they're trying to do, but we never go straight for it. There's something about the way Byron presents himself that fits in with that. That's the way this conversation is set up—we don't really know what he's going to do, but we're trying to talk about it. It's a little bit about him and also about our relationship to him.

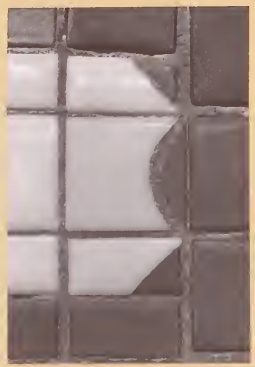
2: So in a way he really is in control, because he's getting us to do this.

1: Byron's work does that to you, too. He gives you a lot of space, which is really generous, but also really intimidating. And that's how I imagine this installation might be. There will be a very gentle gesture that you can expound on, but the rest is sort of left up to you.

2: A lot of people get annoyed with Byron's work. Sometimes explanation is needed or would be helpful, and this show will be the opposite. Byron is questioning all the time, and he's making the viewer question him—and he doubts himself, and he questions himself, and so the people looking at his work start to see a gigantic ball of questions.

1: The question is whether he's duping them or being generous. When he spoke to my friend and me about the work, he would get us really excited, and then he wouldn't say anything. He would work us all up, and then not deliver the punch line. I guess that's the charm—he's creating a space in which the viewer can exist. Maybe he leaves too much space. It's like the power of the work is being restrained. The mystery of Byron's work, the beauty, is very subtle—it takes time. The viewer who doesn't take the time is going to miss it. It's just going to seem lame.

3: Why would it seem lame?



1: Because I think Byron's work is quiet, I think it's slow. I think it's sensitive. I also think it's incredibly subtle. All of that takes a certain sensitivity in the viewer.

2: Byron did the Roche's Point *drawings from Ireland (1998), and they were understated as can be and absolutely beautiful. I resisted, but others said over and over again that they were so refreshing—that they felt renewed by looking at them. The* Roche's Point *drawings looked like Kenneth Noland stripes in the mat, but when you lifted the mats, they were incredibly organic. You could feel the horizon line. Spiritual things are not explainable, you can't articulate them. Of course, it's a dream of some artists to speak the unspeakable, to be able to touch that part in all of us that is a spiritual part. That's the great power of art, that none of us can actually say how you do that or how you touch someone that way. But it is a drive, and you do try to make the spirit world. Those corny movies that try to make a picture of God—they can't do it. When they get to the parts about heaven, you know they're wondering, "How are we going to paint heaven?" They really can't. Maybe Michelangelo did it in the Sistine Chapel's "touch," but you can't do that again. So it is a great opportunity in contemporary art to create that kind of space or to evoke a feeling that transcends, and I think Byron's work goes that way. His daffodil mural (*I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud, *1997) is broad, it's big, and at the*

Louwrien Wijers: What was the thing that first caught you when you saw the work of Joseph Beuys?

Andy Warhol: Well, I like anything that's sort of grey and... not too much colour in it.

Louwrien Wijers: What he said about your work was that it has spirituality.

Andy Warhol: Oh well...what does grey have...

Bob Colacello: I think grey is more spiritual.

Andy Warhol: Yes, grey is more spiritual...

Louwrien Wijers: I would say so too, but I found it such a wonderful remark of him to say: "Andy's work has a fine radiation. He has a spirituality." How do you feel that yourself?

Andy Warhol: Well, I like his daughter.

—Louwrien Wijers, from *Writing as Sculpture: 1978–1987*, 1996

same time it's small, like poetry. He wants to do both things, be humble, but big, and to do both is very hard. It's a good thing to spend your lifetime trying to achieve that fine line. It's about me, but then there's the us. How do you bridge that?

1: It's part of that whole ego thing that Byron is trying to battle with. He gave us that quotation where Andy Warhol talks about the gray in Joseph Beuys' work, and Warhol says that gray is spiritual. That's such a flaky painter's comment. Gray is gray. It's what you do with gray that makes it one thing or another. I was trying to think about what gray is. In Byron's journal entries where he talks about this project, he talks about emptiness. I gave him this quotation from a Buddhist thinker: "See emptiness, have compassion." I have no idea what it means, but I think it means something very important. If you could bring yourself to that, something might really unfold for you. Ultimately, emptiness is about interconnection and impermanence. That's the lack of tangibility in Byron's work. But when you acknowledge this impermanence, you also realize that it connects us all.

2: There is a level of anonymity in people's lives in this city. Especially with 42nd Street. Even though people are always striving for excellence here, they're still so anonymous. Maybe they're not anonymous for a minute, but then they are again. That brings me to the dirt. We don't really know what is going to happen when Byron makes this piece, but he talks about dirt and about New York.

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1: What totally grossed me out when I came to New York was that there is this layer, this surface, over everything. When you clean your apartment, it has a kind of oily texture to it. I started thinking about surface; I was thinking about painting. And then Byron was telling me about all of these ideas, of splashing and dripping. We'll see what he does—at first I thought that he might cover the surface of the gallery black, but since then I've pictured it as a monochrome gray.

*2: Really? I pictured it with a lot of texture. I thought, oh, the surface is going to modulate. Byron has this great ability to go back and talk to modernist painting, talk to a Rothko. Somehow, his work always makes me think of someone who is trying to stand behind himself. My favorite piece of his is the Clyfford Still piece he did at the Neuberger Museum (*Even Stone Is Not Permanent, *1995). It was gigantic, two 30-foot-long walls, but it still stood behind itself. Wow! It was so passive, but also aggressive, and it was absolutely beautiful. Byron thinks too much, and those wall pieces don't let him do that. Inevitably, he gets into the painterly, the push and pull of the paint.*

1: Which is really different than the dirty mark on the wall that is there by chance, or the way dirt collects in cracks.

2: Yes, but you could use those to make something else.

1: Byron keeps saying "I tried this, but it was too beautiful. And then I tried this." This whole notion about the Whitney project working and not working, this whole "no-idea" thing. For a while, Byron was interested in the fact that he couldn't get an idea, and that he wouldn't force himself to come up with one until the last second. Or, how he might not have his name on the piece, let it be hardly anything.

3: You're talking about Byron's work as if he knows just what he's doing. You talk about the "no-idea" idea as if it's just another one of his concepts. But listening to Byron talk about this project and about doing this conversation, I think that on a fundamental level he doesn't know what he's doing.

2: What do you mean he doesn't know what he's doing?

3: Well, he mentioned in one of his journal entries that he considered quitting the project.

1: The creative process is all about doubt and not knowing what you're doing. The minute you stop doubting, you become a really bad artist. We use the phrase Conceptual artist and assume that there is a fully formed idea that gets translated into an object—but that makes the worst art. Because then why make the object at all? Our language is visual, so the meaning has to come out of the making.

In that talk with Lisa [Sigal], Byron was bringing back all of these rejected ideas: somewhere in the unconscious you have the idea, it's already there, you just haven't put it into form yet. In his journal, it's as though the minute an idea becomes viable, he throws it out and starts again from scratch. That's probably a way for him to push himself; it's not about just trying to make a good piece. But the struggle shouldn't make you think that he doesn't know what he's doing.

2: He also gave us that Gerhard Richter quotation that says gray "is suited like no other color to illustrate 'nothing.'" Wanting to illustrate nothing is very contrarian. It's perfect for Byron.

3: The idea of illustrating nothing is one thing, but to say that gray is suited like no other color to illustrate nothing—that's a totally meaningless statement.

In the beginning (approximately 8 years ago), when I painted over a few canvases in gray, I did it because I did not know what I should paint or what there was to paint, and it was clear to me that on such pathetic grounds only meaningless results could emerge. In time, however, I noticed differences in quality between the gray areas and became aware that these revealed nothing of their destructive motivation. The paintings began to teach me. By generalizing the personal dilemma, they dissolve it; the despair turned into a constructive statement, relative perfection and beauty, therefore into painting.

Gray. It simply says nothing, it triggers neither feelings nor associations, it is, in fact, neither visible nor invisible. It is its insignificance which makes it so apt to convey, to illustrate, and in a downright illusionistic manner, just like a photo. And it is suited like no other colour to illustrate "nothing."

—Gerhard Richter, from *Paintings*, 1996

2: Oh no. Doesn't gray make you feel nothing? I think gray can mean nothing.

3: Sure it can, but why more than any other color?

2: It can say nothingness. It's very hard to paint nothing with red. Red is something.

3: So we don't actually need art—we could just have a system where gray represents nothing, red represents anger, green represents envy, white represents hopefulness, and black represents despair.

1: Eugenie Tsai from the Whitney called Byron and asked him, "Is gray a color or a shade?" I don't know much about painting, but gray is the absence of color in a way that brown is all of the colors mixed, right? The problem you're having is that we're giving these metaphors to color. I'm with you in a certain way. I was having more problems with gray being spiritual than gray being nothing. But then I came all the way around to see it as being emptiness, which seems spiritual, in a sense. I think about language and the way we use "gray." It has a sad connotation, more than being neutral, like a gray day.

2: Right, but nothing's not neutral.

1: Byron's work is not abstraction, it's not monochrome gray. It may look like that when you go into the room, but he's thinking about the context of the walls and the street and the dirt. It may seem like just a gray surface, but in the end that's not what he's interested in at all. And this conversation will exist in the periphery of the work. It won't be necessarily about the work. An essay that says "this is what the piece means" or "Byron says this, so..."—that could really squash the work. Ideally, the viewer will have to make a creative leap between what we're saying right now and what they are seeing, and—we hope—the space between those two positions would be a very interesting place to be.

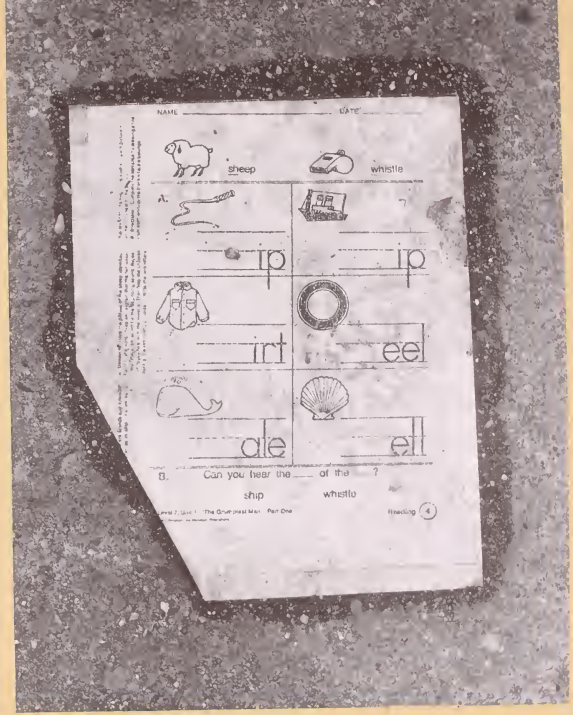
He came to California for a week and the weather was bad. A friend drove him to the airport and apologized for the gray and gloomy weather. "That's all right," he said. "Gray is my favorite color."

Johns always describes himself with a peculiar flat accuracy. He insists he is a poor colorist, with little ability to discriminate between colors he sees. He says he is worse at this than the average person. One is tempted to take him at his word. Then he reports this anecdote: "I was working on a colored numbers painting. When I worked on it for longer than a minute, the entire painting would turn gray to me. I couldn't see any of the colors, and I would have to stop."

—Michael Crichton, from *Jasper Johns*, 1977

Entries from Byron Kim's Journal, 1999

January 22—Eugenie Tsai [senior curator for the Permanent Collection, Whitney Museum of American Art] leaves a phone message to this effect: "Byron, we're trying to answer the question: Is gray a color or a shade? And we figure you're the expert." Since I'm really busy with the kids, I don't get a chance to reply for two days during which I brood about the gray question. It's a ridiculous question, but my response is that gray as a *word* connotes neutrality and is therefore, due to its necessary vagueness, less a color, but this very vagueness makes colors that are gray often difficult to name, which makes gray as *color* richer due to subtlety. I thought that this question might have some curatorial importance, but eventually found out that someone's seven-year-old got the question wrong at school and thought that the Whitney would be an authoritative source.



January 23—Ran into Lee Mingwei, who was surprised that I could agree to do a show without having an idea. This made me more determined to push it to the limit, giving me the notion to wait until Lynne [Yamamoto]'s show comes down to figure out what to do, a very scary thought. The attractiveness of it is that it can be done virtually only by a painter, yet no one does it.

In the evening I went to an AC Project Room opening. A bunch of us go to a Chinese restaurant afterwards. Laura Hoptman [assistant curator, Drawings, The Museum of Modern Art] wonders why artists need so many little essays about their work. On the way back from this dinner, I'm thinking about the gray question and wonder what a show that is all gray would be about or would be like.

Byron Kim was born in La Jolla, California, in 1961. He graduated from Yale University in 1983 with a BA in English. Around that time, he decided to try art. In the summer of 1986, as a student at The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, he committed himself to painting. Kim began to exhibit his work in 1991 and has had numerous exhibitions. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Cover photograph and those on pages 3 through 13 are Byron Kim's first published photographs and were shot in or near his home, his studio, and the Philip Morris Companies building.

Acknowledgments

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—B.K.

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Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris
120 Park Avenue at 42nd Street
New York, NY 10017

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for Alice